

Sermon for the 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost  
September 22, 2019  
The Right Thing for the Wrong Reason

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1  
Psalm 79:1-9  
1 Timothy 2:1-7  
Luke 16:1-13

There is nothing in the world that will tug at my heartstrings more than seeing a small child being teased or bullied by older ones. Doesn't it just get your goat? It infuriates me. It's so unfair and the little guy has no way of defending himself or fighting back. It makes me want to dash in like Superman and make things right. I want to fix it. I want to level the playing field. And if the truth be told, I'd like to be able to give those doing the bullying and the teasing a taste of their own medicine. There's nothing like 'payback' is there?

The gospel lesson we just heard has something to say about inequality and injustice and a rigged system and those who have to operate in it. It's called the parable of the Dishonest Manager or the Shrewd Manager. The setting for this parable is in first century Palestine where the economic system is rigged and the people doing the hardest work...the farmers and the day laborers...are the small child being bullied and teased by the bigger, wealthier ones. So here's the way it goes: a landlord who usually lives some distance away from the land itself, allows workers to tend the fields in exchange for which they can keep a little of the crop for themselves...a very little. It's hardly enough to keep them alive and put a roof over their heads. The landowner sends his manager to collect the harvest that is the 'rent' for use of the field. While he's there, he generally gets what is owed to his master and then takes a cut for himself as well...his commission. And if the farmers and the day laborers do manage to eek out a bit of a living for themselves, the Roman tax collectors come along and take the lion's share of even that. It's a rigged system in the worst way. The people doing the most and the hardest work are the ones who get the least compensation.

It's in this framework that Jesus tells this parable about the dishonest manager. He's been put on notice by the rich man who hired him because someone has accused the manager of squandering the rich man's assets...he's misappropriated the funds...cooked the books...or so the rumor has it. The manager is in a bit of a panic. What am I going to do now?, he says to himself. I can't do manual labor and I'm too proud to beg. The manager has felt very secure in his position, but now he knows that it's temporary. He's not going to be in charge of the rich man's goods anymore. He's been put on notice. And guess what? So have we. Most of us feel very secure in this life even though we know somewhere in the back of our heads that all of this

is temporary. What we have now is not permanent. It is not eternal. We know that and yet we live and act as though we don't know it. We live as though we think this is the way it's going to be forever, but it isn't. So what are we to do? When it sinks in, we panic just a bit, don't we? Like the dishonest manager, what we have now is temporary and will be taken away from us. Remember this one thing: there is no U-Haul on the back of the hearse.

This parable is about stewardship and about economic justice. So while the manager is still employed he decides to take some action himself that he hopes will help him when this order has passed...in other words, when he gets fired as a steward...and the new order presents itself...the time when he will have no job. He makes a decision based on his own needs. He's going to get sacked and he has no way to support himself, but knowing people as he does, he knows that if he reduces the amount of rent that the people owe the landlord, they will be so grateful to him and they will feel so indebted to him that when he loses his job, they will invite him into their homes and they will take care of him. Pretty shrewd, huh? That's what the rich man thinks. And he commends the manager for being so insightful about how people work and how best to take care of himself.

Now we aren't told in this parable whether the manager reduced the amount owed to the rich man by forfeiting his commission or if he's simply stealing from the rich man by reducing the amount of rent the people have to pay. Both are ill-gotten gains and dishonest wealth. So if he's stealing from the rich man in order to give the poor people more, he's being a bit of a Robin Hood. He's doing something to correct the economic injustice of the system in which he operates. And if he's giving up his own commission, he is sacrificing the dishonest wealth that could have come to him in order to correct that same economic injustice. He's one man working in an economically oppressive system designed to increase the gap between the rich and the poor. He's using some dishonest wealth...either his own commission or his master's exorbitant rent...to be faithful to the notion of a fair and equitable economic system. So if he can be faithful in decisions he makes about this dishonest wealth, Jesus says, how much more faithful will he be when he's given true riches?

And what are the true riches? What is it that we take out of this world with us? It's certainly not material goods. We aren't going to take the car or the house or the boat on the lake or our 401K. Those things stay here. Those are the things we must part with when we are relieved of our duties here. So what is it that goes with us? Well, think for a moment about what the dishonest steward stumbled upon when he decided to reduce the rent that people owed? They were indeed indebted to him. They were overjoyed and they weren't likely to forget that the manager forgave them their debts. He just wiped them away in a stroke. It's easy to imagine how much joy they felt. And it's easy to see what positive feelings that would have toward the manager who had been participating in the oppressive economic system for as long as they

could remember. He had suddenly relieved them of their economic burden and they're feeling pretty good about this manager...even beholden to him for what he's done for them.

It's just the way we feel when someone wipes out our debts? How unburdened and joyful do we feel when our debts are forgiven us? How much gratitude and love do we feel for the one who is responsible for wiping out those debts? There is a huge sense of relief and love for the person who did that for us. Without realizing it, the dishonest manager has changed the dynamic between himself and those from whom he collected rent. He is now a savior to them. He is now the one who provides some fairness in the system. He is the one who sets things right and fixes things for them. The manager and the people now have a relationship. He isn't just the rent collector and they aren't just the peasants in the field. The manager and the people are all real people with one another. They see each other as people. They have feelings for each other.

Do you remember Jesus telling us a few weeks ago to store up treasures in heaven where moth cannot destroy them and thief cannot steal them? Do you know what those treasures are? They are our relationships with other people. Those relationships are the only things we take out of this world with us. They are the true treasure. The dishonest manager, in an effort to look out for himself, accidentally stumbled onto a course of action that opened the door for him to true relationship. He did something right... he made honest relationships with people...because he was trying to save his own skin. It was the wrong reason. But he did do the right thing. He did strike a blow for economic justice. He did set things right for the people. This is a parable of stewardship...not just in economics, but with our relationships as well. When we are good stewards of our relationships, we never use people, we see them as individuals...we see each one as a real a valuable person. Whatever we have now in terms of economic assets is no more than temporary management. We have all been given notice. The parable invites us to be like the wise steward; who was ready even to cheat the present order for the sake of the new order he knew was coming. It matters what we do in this life. The decisions we make in this life help prepare us for the life to come. The best and eternal investments we make are the ones we make in other people.

Jesus set the example for us. He gave up his own life...his earthly life...so that our sins might be forgiven us and so that we might have eternal life. He paid our debt. His was a sacrifice of himself. He rectified a rigged system. He made it right. He fixed it for us. And as a result, we are forever indebted to him. We are proud to have a relationship with him and we offer him a home in our hearts where we will love him for all eternity. Eternal life through Jesus Christ is God's gift to us.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.